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Statement submitted by Sociologists for Women in Society, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

School fees must be abolished to reach universal primary education

1. The 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit challenged the world's nations to reach universal primary education for all children (MDG 2) and to eliminate gender disparities at all educational levels (MDG 3) by 2015. Yet sixty-nine million children are still not in school, and in sub-Saharan Africa, 48 per cent of children do not complete primary school. About two thirds of these children are girls. School fees present an insurmountable barrier for the parents of girls and contribute greatly to the number of children out of school.

School fees prevent the most vulnerable children, especially poor rural girls, from enrolling in school

2. In some poor rural areas no more than 10 or 15 per cent of girls are enrolled in school. Children in poor families may have to spend part of their time in informal work earning their own school fees, taking time away from their studies. Poor parents delay their children's entrance into school or trade the education of one child for another when they do not have funds for school fees. When families encounter financial difficulties such as an illness requiring medicine, a girl's school fees are easily diverted.

3. There is a strong correlation between increases in school fees and the incidence of school dropouts. Even small fees prevent the most vulnerable children from being able to attend school. School fees are highly regressive in the sense that they prevent the poorest children from attending, reserving scarce public resources for children whose families are able to afford the school fees.

Poverty is perpetuated by the imposition of school fees

4. In some areas, as much as 25 per cent of all household expenditures are spent on school fees when two students or more are in the household. Families go into debt for school fees to lenders who charge usurious rates of 50 per cent per month. School fees divert income away from food and small businesses. Uneducated women earn less and often must choose whether to support their families or pay for their children's school fees. Illiterate women work for meagre wages at the lowest levels of employment and cannot reinvest their irregular modest profits to develop their small business because they need to pay for their children's school fees. This reinforces a cycle of poverty. It is estimated that 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty if they left school with basic literacy skills.

School costs force poor parents to choose between the education of their sons and their daughters

5. In patrilocal societies, where girls leave their natal family to become part of their husband's family, there are fewer benefits to poor families from educating daughters since they do not bring income into the family. Older sisters in poor families are particularly at risk of not continuing their education because their labour is needed at home. A study of China showed that girls must compete with their brothers for their parents' investment in education expenses. In rural areas of China, 80 per cent of girls (and 60 per cent of boys) are not in school, despite the

* Issued without formal editing.

requirement of universal education. Even in prosperous regions of China, three fourths of school dropouts are girls. In the 1990s, having a brother reduced a girl's chances of attending senior high school or college.

School fees result in less educated mothers and less healthy families

6. Educated mothers tend to have healthier families. When girls are not educated, the long-term result is that their families have poorer nutrition and suffer more illnesses. The problem is particularly acute for orphaned girls who have great difficulty getting an education and are likely to be uneducated as mothers. Providing every mother with a secondary education would save the lives of 1.8 million children every year. Yet a lack of funding prevents poor families from sending their daughters on to secondary school.

School fees make the lives of female AIDS orphans more difficult

7. School fees are a significant problem in the care of AIDS orphans. Grandmothers who care for their orphaned grandchildren struggle to find the money for school fees. Without money for school fees, AIDS orphans must forego school and earn their living on the streets in informal work. Orphaned girls may find a "sugar daddy" to pay their school fees in exchange for sexual favours, placing girls in the difficult position of trading their privacy, virtue, and health for their schooling.

School fee abolition benefits all children, especially poor children, in low-income countries

8. A number of low-income countries have taken bold, positive steps to reduce fees as called for in the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action. Sub-Saharan Africa's gross enrolment rate (GER) grew to 97 per cent in 2005, a 36 per cent increase in enrolment over six years. Dramatic gains in primary school enrolment were made when school fees were abolished in sub-Saharan countries, a 68 per cent increase in Uganda, 51 per cent in Malawi, 26 per cent in Cameroon, and 23 per cent in the United Republic of Tanzania. In countries that have abolished school fees, enrolment of children in the lowest quintile has increased dramatically so that poor children are the main beneficiaries of school fee abolition. In Malawi, for instance, the net enrolment ratio for children in the poorest quintile was only 33 per cent in 1990; following school fee abolition, the ratio increased to 76 per cent in 1997.

Without school fee abolition, the goal of universal primary school completion by 2015 will not be met

9. The large majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa are at risk of not reaching universal primary school completion by 2015. The United Republic of Tanzania was the only major sub-Saharan country to reach universal primary school completion by 2005. To help children complete primary school, school fee abolition must be combined with broad programmes to maintain educational quality such as increased numbers of teachers, teacher manuals, and teacher training. Governments need to lower indirect school costs such as uniforms, textbooks and informal fees. To provide funding for these improvements, capitation grants that provide a per-pupil amount have proven effective in replacing school fees while providing access for vulnerable groups, including poor rural girls, the disabled and orphans.